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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3345
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEPADJ/CJTF HOA
RUEWMFD/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RHMFIUU/HQ USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION HOLDS FIRST PUBLIC PROTEST SINCE 2005

REF: ADDIS 594 (AND PREVIOUS)

¶1. (SBU) Mainstream opposition party Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) staged a peaceful public demonstration in Addis Ababa on April 16 to protest the re-jailing of its Chairperson, Birtukan Midekssa (reftel). The demonstration was authorized by municipal authorities and was the first opposition protest in Ethiopia (and only second public protest of any kind) since the violent aftermath of the 2005 national elections. Embassy officials monitoring the event observed approximately 140 UDJ members and supporters marching from UDJ headquarters two and a half miles to the Prime Minister's offices (with a stop en route at the Presidential palace) where they presented a petition for Birtukan's release to a government representative. According to press reports, they received a letter in return that said Birtukan would not/not be released because she had broken the law. The event lasted approximately three hours.

¶2. (SBU) Prior to the demonstration, city police were stationed in pairs at several key intersections, but otherwise there were no changes to usual traffic and security patterns in Addis Ababa. Tadessa Tesfaye, the police commander for Kirkos Sub-City, was on hand to coordinate security. When the protest march began, city police on motorcycles controlled traffic flow in the lanes not occupied by the protesters and clusters of police, both in trucks and on foot, more visibly monitored the protesters, but did not interfere with the march. One source told us that there was a significant plainclothes police presence in the streets as well. Armed federal police staged out of sight on the grounds of a school near Stefanos Church, by Meskal Square, mid-way along the route. Pedestrians were allowed to pass the demonstrators without restriction and very few stopped to watch the march (and none joined).

¶3. (SBU) UDJ Vice Chairs Gezachew Shiferaw and Hailu Araya led the march. Former Ethiopian president Negasso Gidada, now an independent parliamentarian, also marched in solidarity with UDJ. Throughout the march, one mega-phoned protester led chants of "Release Birtukan" in Amharic. The protesters held aloft placards with five different slogans: (i) "the government must respect the rule of law"; (ii) "release Birtukan without preconditions"; (iii) "UDJ will not be weakened by Birtukan's arrest"; (iv) "the arrest of our leaders will not weaken the party"; and (v) "instilling fear in citizens' minds is a crime." International and local journalists filmed and recorded the event without incident, accompanying the protesters the entire route.

Comment

¶4. (SBU) The Ethiopian government's decision to grant permission for this demonstration, and the responsible behavior of police and protesters alike, is an encouraging sign. Public opinion since the 16th is split between those who view the re-authorization of public demonstrations as the first flicker of hope for political space for mainstream opposition groups following several years of government retrenchment post-2005 and those who continue to view UDJ's struggle for a license to demonstrate as a one-time event. We will watch closely over the next weeks and months to determine whether there have been any repercussions for participants in the march, which will further gauge the success of this limited democratic experiment. Unfortunately, the government has shown no indication of any flexibility on the broader issue of Birtukan's continued detention and pardon revocation. The case continues to symbolize the broader constraints on opposition political activities and freedom of expression in Ethiopia. We will continue to use private diplomacy to press for resolution of Birtukan's case. The coming days will show the implementation of an April 15 High Court ruling requiring prison officials to respect Birtukan's right to be visited in prison. If the right is upheld, EmbOffs will visit her soon.

End Comment.
YAMAMOTO